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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001555

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: FOREIGN MINISTER PROVIDES HIS ASSESSMENT OF THE GOVERNMENT AND THE PEACE PROCESS

REF: COLOMBO 1526 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead. Reason 1.4(b,d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In a September 15 meeting with the Ambassador, Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar provided his update on the peace process with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), stating that the group was creating barriers to resuming negotiations. Kadirgamar added that he was appreciative of the international community's pressure on the Tigers and thought that it was beginning to have a small impact on them. Kadirgamar said that the recently publicized support for the government by the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) gave the government its parliamentary majority and ensured the government's stability through the budget debate. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) The Ambassador met with Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar on September 15. The Ambassador said when he saw Deputy Secretary Armitage in mid-August, he underscored President Kumaratunga's flexibility on the agenda for returning to talks, in the face of LTTE recalcitrance and continued killings of its opponents. The Ambassador added that the Deputy Secretary remains deeply interested in Sri Lanka and the two had specifically discussed the text of the August 19 press statement released in Washington.

¶3. (C) The FM and Ambassador both agreed that part of the difficulty in getting the LTTE back to the peace talks was that the group did not respond to traditional incentives of financial or economic assistance, but did whatever was necessary to further its political goals. Kadirgamar said he tried to explain that to Japanese officials during his recent trip to Tokyo and urged the Japanese to be patient with the GSL. The international pressure was very useful and beginning to have a small effect on the LTTE, Kadirgamar said, adding that he appreciated the strong statements by Ambassador Black during his September 7-9 visit to Sri Lanka. Echoing comments of many other government and non-government interlocutors, the Foreign Minister also thought that the LTTE's lack of control in the East was another significant reason in delaying its return to peace talks.

¶4. (C) Turning to local politics, Kadirgamar characterized the recently announced support for the government by the upcountry Tamil estate workers party, Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), as a "majority on paper." The Foreign Minister did add, however, that the government would likely no longer pursue the support of the nine-MPs party of Buddhist monks, the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU). In his opinion, the "budget was safe," referring to the annual end-of-year debate on the government's fiscal agenda that is often very politicized. Kadirgamar indicated that the government was busy with preparing the budget, which would have its first reading in Parliament on November 19.

¶5. (C) As for the government's main coalition partner, the leftist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), Kadirgamar told the Ambassador that the group was doing well, not complaining about "fundamental issues," except for the LTTE's Interim Self-Governing Authority (ISGA) proposal. The Foreign Minister conceded, however, that the JVP had a pretty firm line against the Tigers' proposal. He added that the Tigers were very aware of the JVP's negative stance and were continually using that rhetoric in their resistance to resume negotiations.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: The Foreign Minister offered his assessment of politics in Sri Lanka: the President's government was doing fine, the JVP were coming along and the LTTE was still operating by its own rules. He continued his praise for international, especially U.S., pressure on the Tigers but did not offer any new ideas for getting the group back to the peace table. He seemed content to let LTTE's internal struggle in the East provide the excuse for lack of negotiations. Kadirgamar, a major JVP supporter, may likely have this attitude because he recognizes that the government still has its own internal dissension on the agenda for talks with the LTTE and has not been successful in getting the JVP to toe the party line. END COMMENT.

LUNSTEAD